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ABSTRACT

The major challenge presented by the Information Age is equitable access to information. This challenge results from the sheer amount of information that is being produced and the rapid advances in technology for storing, organizing, and accessing this growing mass of information. One effect of these developments is an increasingly fragmented information base, large components of which are available only to people with money and/or acceptable institutional affiliations. This paper begins by discussing the importance of information literacy to individuals, businesses, and citizenship. Opportunities to develop information literacy are then described, with emphasis on the role that libraries can play in this endeavor. The paper concludes with the statement that knowledge is this country's most precious commodity, and that information literate people are America's most valuable resource. (MAB)

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White House Conference on Library and Information Services 1991

The Challenge of the Information Age

Excerpts from a 1989 report of
the AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE
ON INFORMATION LITERACY

Maryland Governor's Conference on Libraries and Information Services

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE INFORMATION AGE

The Challenge

No other change in American society has offered greater challenges than the emergence of the Information Age. Information is expanding at an unprecedented rate, and enormously rapid strides are being made in the technology for storing, organizing, and accessing the ever growing tidal wave of information. The combined effect of these factors is an increasingly fragmented information base - large components of which are only available to people with money and/or acceptable institutional affiliations.

In an information society all people should have the right to information which can enhance their lives. Out of the super-abundance of available information, people need to be able to obtain specific information to meet a wide range of personal and business needs. These needs are largely driven either by the desire for personal growth and advancement or by the rapidly changing social, political, and economic environments of American society. What is true today is often outdated tomorrow. A good job today may be obsolete next year. To promote economic independence and quality of existence, there is a lifelong need for being informed and up-to-date.

How our country deals with the realities of the Information Age will have enormous impact on our democratic way of life and on our nation's ability to compete internationally. Within America's information society, there also exists the potential of addressing many long-standing social and economic inequities. To reap such benefits, people - as individuals and as a nation - must be information literate. Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business and Citizenship

In Individuals' Lives

On a daily basis, problems are more difficult to solve when people lack access to meaningful information vital to good decision making. Even in areas where one can achieve an expertise, constantly changing and expanding information bases necessitate an ongoing struggle for individuals to keep up-to-date and in control of their daily information environment as well as with information from other fields which can affect the outcomes of their decisions.

In an attempt to reduce information to easily manageable segments, most people have become dependent on others for their information. Information prepackaging in schools and through broadcast and print news media, in fact, encourages people to accept the opinions of others without much thought. When opinions are biased, negative, or inadequate for the needs at hand, many people are left helpless to improve the situation confronting them.

Information literacy is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth. It provides them with the ability to build their own arguments and to experience the excitement of the search for knowledge. It not only prepares them for lifelong learning, but, by experiencing the excitement of their own successful quests for knowledge, it also creates in young people the motivation for pursuing learning throughout their lives. Moreover, the process of searching and interacting with the ideas and values of their own and others' cultures deepens people's capacities to understand and position themselves within larger communities of time and place. By drawing on the arts, history, and literature of previous generations, individuals and communities can affirm the best in their cultures and determine future goals.

It is unfortunate that the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences which will promote these abilities. Minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people are among those most likely to lack access to the information that can improve their situations. Most are not even aware of the potential help that is available to them. Libraries, which provide the best access point to information for most U.S. citizens, are left untapped by those who most need help to improve their quality of life. As a former U.S. Secretary of Education Terrell Bell once wrote, ''There is a danger of a new elite developing in our country: the information elite''.

In Business

Herbert E. Meyer, who has served as an editor for FORTUNE magazine and as vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council, underscores the importance of access to and use of good information for business in an age characterized by rapid change, a global environment, and unprecedented access to information. In his 1988 book, REAL WORLD INTELLIGENCE, he describes the astonishment and growing distress of executives who ''are discovering that the only thing as difficult and dangerous as managing a large enterprise with too little information is managing one with too much''. While Meyer emphasizes that companies should rely on public sources that are available to anyone for much of their information, it is clear that many companies do not know how to find and use such information effectively. Every day lack of timely and accurate information is costly to American businesses.

The need for people in business who are competent managers of information is important at all levels, and the realities of the Information Age require serious rethinking of how businesses should be conducted. Harlan Cleveland explores this theme in his book, THE KNOWLEDGE EXECUTIVE. ''Information (organized data, the raw material for specialized knowledge, and generalist wisdom) is now our most important, and pervasive resource. Information workers now compose more than half the U.S. labor force. But this newly dominant resource is quite unlike the tangible resources we have heretofore thought of as valuable. The differences help explain why we get into so much trouble trying to use for the management of information concepts that worked all right in understanding the management of things - concepts such as control, secrecy, ownership, privilege and geopolitics. Because the old pyramids of influence and control were based on just these ideas, they are now crumbling. Their weakening is not always obvious...but there is ample evidence that those who learn now to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement...''

In Citizenship

Citizenship in a modern democracy involves more than knowledge of how to access vital information. It also involves a capacity to recognize propaganda, distortion, and other misuses and abuses of information. People are daily subjected to statistics about health, the economy, national defense, and countless products. One person arranges the information to prove his point, another arranges it to prove hers. One political party says the social indicators are encouraging, another calls them frightening. One drug company states most doctors prefer its product, another "proves" doctors favor its product.

In such an environment, information literacy provides insight into the manifold ways in which people can all be deceived and misled. Information literate citizens are able to spot and expose chicanery, disinformation, and lies. To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future.

Opportunities to Develop Information Literacy

Information literacy is a survival skill in the Information Age. Instead of drowning in the abundance of information that floods their lives, information literate people know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision - whether the information they select comes from a computer, a book, a government agency, a film, or any number of other possible resources. Libraries, which provide a significant public access point to such information and usually at no cost, must play a key role in preparing people for the demands of today's information society. Just as public libraries were once a means of education and a better life for many of the over 20 million immigrants of the late 1800s and early 1900s, they remain today as the potentially strongest and most far-reaching community resource for lifelong learning. Public libraries not only provide access to information, but they also remain crucial to providing people with the knowledge necessary to make meaningful use of existing resources. They remain one of the few safeguards against information control by a minority.

Although libraries historically have provided a meaningful structure for relating information in ways that facilitate the development of knowledge, they have been all but ignored in the literature about the information society. Even national education reform reports, starting with A NATION AT RISK in 1983, largely exclude libraries. No K-12 report has explored the potential role of libraries or the need for information literacy. In the higher education reform literature, Education Commission for the States President Frank Newman's 1985 report, HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE AMERICAN RESURGENCE, only addresses the instructional potential of libraries in passing, but it does raise the concern for the accessibility of materials within the knowledge explosion. In fact, no report until COLLEGE, the 1986 Carnegie Foundation Report, gave substantive consideration to the role of libraries in addressing the challenges facing higher education.

What is called for is not a new information studies curriculum but, rather, a restructuring of the learning process. Textbooks, workbooks, and lectures must yield to a learning process based on the

information resources available for learning and problem solving throughout people's lifetimes - to learning experiences that build a lifelong habit of library use. Such a learning process would actively involve students in the process of knowing when they have a need for information, identifying information needed to address a given problem or issue, finding needed information, evaluating the information, organizing the information, using the information effectively to address the problem or issue at hand. Such a restructuring of the learning process will not only enhance the critical thinking skills of students but will also empower them for lifelong learning and the effective performance of professional and civic responsibilities.

The one common ingredient in all of these concerns is an awareness of the rapidly changing requirements for a productive, healthy, and satisfying life. To respond effectively to an ever-changing environment, people need more than just a knowledge base, they also need techniques for exploring it, connecting it to other knowledge bases, and making practical use of it. In other words, the landscape upon which we used to stand has been transformed, and we are being forced to establish a new foundation called information literacy. Now knowledge - not minerals or agricultural products or manufactured goods - is this country's most precious commodity, and people who are information literate - who know how to acquire knowledge and use it - are America's most valuable resource.

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